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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL/IRF, PRM, CA/OCS

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SUBJECT: PROTESTANTS CRITICIZE MFI ROLE IN CENTRAL HIGHLANDS  
DEMONSTRATIONS

REF: A) HCMC 0401 B) HCMC 0507 C) HANOI 1113

1. (SBU) Summary: Despite continued assertions from Human Rights Watch, the Transnational Radical Party, Montagnard Foundation, Inc. (MFI) and various other groups that police and military units brutally beat, raped, killed and arrested ethnic minority demonstrators in the Central Highlands during Easter protests, ConGen HCMC has yet to hear any first-hand reports of excessive force by the GVN. However, while Protestant leaders expressed anger over MFI's role in the demonstrations, they also gave credence to reports of police brutality. As post has previously reported from extensive interviews with local contacts in HCMC (ref A), the reality at this point appears to lie somewhat closer to GVN claims of relatively small demonstrations and limited casualties (refs B and C). Mission officers plan to travel to the region April 26-28, but even so it may be difficult to verify the details for some time. End summary.

2. (SBU) A well-known third-country source shared with ConGenoff reports he had received last week, which included claims of at least two dead and injuries in the tens. While the numbers match those provided by the GVN (reftels), his sources attributed the two deaths to gunshots fired by government forces. They reported approximately 15,000 protesters each in Dak Lak and Gia Lai provinces, but said the demonstrators were peaceful. Many carried similar banners decrying land confiscations and interference in ethnic minority affairs. The banners apparently did not specify whether they were directed at the GVN or ethnic majority Kinh.

3. (SBU) Two other sources, Protestant pastors from the Central Highlands well known to ConGen and generally considered reliable, provided him with charts detailing the location of demonstrations. Their hand-drawn maps showed 13 flashpoints in Dak Lak, and another 17 in Gia Lai. These include the districts of Cu M'Gar, Krong Ana, and Krong Pak in Dak Lak; and Dak Doa, Chu Se, and Ayunpa in Gia Lai. The number of protesters at most of these locations were said to have ranged between one and several thousand. A written narrative that accompanied the Dak Lak map gave no precise casualty figures, but intimated a number of deaths, injuries, and arrests. The two pastors were allegedly reluctant to meet with ConGenoffs during their weekend visit to HCMC, given the increased surveillance they believed was in place. As a result, ConGenoffs were unable to determine whether or not these two sources had actually witnessed any of the actions they described.

4. (SBU) According to ConGen's third-country contact, these two pastors decried the involvement of Kok Ksor and MFI in organizing the protests. They accused MFI of intentionally staging the demonstrations over Easter weekend to attract the greatest possible international attention, and were said to be "terribly angry" with MFI for the harm that had befallen so many "innocent" people in the Central Highlands. They were certain that the protests had almost nothing to do with religion, estimating that fewer than ten percent of the protesters were Christian. They said the demonstrators had been duped by promises of resettlement in the U.S. Contrary to GVN claims, however, the two pastors were also said to have reported a harsh response by security forces armed with spiked clubs, chains, and other weapons. They contradicted GVN statements that the demonstrations had ended on April 11, noting that the last of the fighting had not ended until the following Saturday, April 17. However, they had been able to hold Easter services without interference and normal Sunday services the following week.

5. (SBU) Aid project workers living in or near Buon Ma Thuot City in Dak Lak told a German diplomat the demonstrators there had been quite violent, but the police had mostly exercised restraint, at least initially. While it was unclear how much these individuals had seen for themselves, they were certain that ethnic minority protesters had actually occupied the provincial People's Committee in the town for at least one night. They also said the demonstrators indicated they were waiting to be taken to the U.S. Their estimates of the size of the demonstrations were closer to those of the pastors than MFI, but they had no sense of overall casualty figures, although they said they thought the number of deaths was nearer to two than twenty.

6. (SBU) Comment: ConGen and Embassy are now scheduled to travel to Dak Lak and Gia Lai provinces April 26-28. While we are unlikely to have unfettered access to individuals who witnessed or

participated in the demonstrations, we hope to get a clearer picture of what really happened. Based on responsible sources that have reported both good and bad news about their situations vis a vis the GVN, we continue to believe that some organizations are making exaggerated claims about the size and extent of the demonstrations and the nature of the GVN's response. Still, we do hear credible reports of police force resulting in limited deaths and injuries. The latest reports from Human Rights Watch are slightly more measured than their earlier statements, and appear to be based almost entirely on our third-country contact (who has written for them in the past). While at least some of his sources are good, we don't know how much of their information was based on first-hand observation.

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